

Contagion:- the real reason why the EU is concerned about Donald Trump

Boris Johnson certainly has a way with words. He chose to absent himself from an emergency dinner for EU foreign ministers convened yesterday (Sunday 13th) to discuss the consequences of Donald Trump's election victory, saying that they should snap out of a "collective whinge-o-rama".

Some of Mr Johnson's European colleagues talked quite openly of their "horror" at the prospect of a President Trump, echoing the tones of Jean-Claude Juncker, the EU Commission President, who said that "The election of Trump poses the risk of upsetting intercontinental relations in their foundation and in their structure." In other reaction from the other side of the channel, France's President Hollande said that the Trump Victory "opens a period of uncertainty". Gérard Araud, France's ambassador to the USA, went further, saying, "'After Brexit and this election, everything is now possible. A world is collapsing before our eyes.'" That Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament, would react negatively, comes as no surprise, calling the Trump victory "another Brexit night" and claiming that a "wave of protest" was engulfing established politics. Even his compatriot Angela Merkel, a woman not known for making extreme statements, congratulated Trump while at the same time hinted at her disapproval, telling reporters that his election campaign featured "confrontations that were difficult to bear".

By contrast, Theresa May, gave a characteristically measured response to the Trump victory. Having made some critical comments about him when his candidacy was first announced, she responded to his victory in a gracious way saying, "I would like to congratulate Donald Trump on being elected the

next President of the United States, following a hard-fought campaign” and stated that she looked forward to working with him.

It is very clear that Trump the campaigner made all manner of statements that flew in the face of everything the EU stands for – his opposition to mass immigration, his climate change scepticism and his desire for a better relationship with Russia for instance. However, the matter of how Trump the president will behave is almost irrelevant. The damage has been done and the real concern in Brussels is whether the sentiments that propelled Mr Trump to his unexpected victory will push the EU into a further and deeper crisis than the Brexit vote.

In other words, does President designate Trump make a President le Pen more likely? Will the Trump victory boost support for *Alternative für Deutschland* to such a degree that Chancellor Merkel’s power – or even her re-election prospects – may be dealt a mortal blow? Even before next year’s general elections in France and Germany, Austria is holding a re-run of its Presidential election on 4th December where Green candidate Alexander van der Bellen faces a stiff challenge from Norbert Hofer, whose Freedom (Freiheit) Party is another EU-critical anti-establishment party which so ruffles feathers in Brussels.

The same day that Austria goes to the polls, Italian voters will take part in a referendum on constitutional reform. Matteo Renzi, the current Prime Minister, has staked his future on securing a “yes” vote. A rag-tag group of 13 parties, including both far left and far right, oppose it and with Beppe Grillo’s Five Star movement among them, Mr Renzi may be defeated.

The phrase “the EU is in a crisis” has been repeated *ad nauseam* since the Great Recession of 2008. One of the Remain camp’s pleas during the Brexit referendum was that we shouldn’t be giving a further kick in the teeth to an already wobbly EU.

The problem is that the Brexit vote and the rise of

politicians like Marine le Pen or Beppe Grillo are not the cause of the crisis but a consequence of it. In spite of the denials of some remainers during the referendum campaign, the European project always has been about the creation of a federal superstate. The evidence is there for all to see in the European Parliament's visitors' centre in Brussels, which contains a plaque saying ***"National sovereignty is the root cause of the most crying evils of our times...The only final remedy for this evil is the federal union of the peoples."*** Perhaps ironically, in view of the Brexit vote, these are the words of a British diplomat, Philip Kerr, later Lord Lothian.

In the early years following the signing of the Treaty of Rome, most leaders of original six participating countries and their supporters in countries keen to sign up – including Edward Heath in this country – supported the vision of a federal Europe with great enthusiasm. One of the most enthusiastic federalists of the 1960s was Jean Rey, a Belgian lawyer and Liberal politician who was to become the second president of the European Commission in 1967. I can recall being asked to translate a speech he made shortly afterwards and his enthusiasm for the project was self-evident.

Although a certain amount of wool had to be pulled over the eyes of the electorates of the original six nations in those early years, there was little resistance to the basic idea of a Federal Europe – at least, once the volatile and unpredictable General de Gaulle left office in 1969.

Fast forward to the last decade and that ability to inspire support for the federalist project so epitomised by Jean Rey just isn't there any more. The two latest keystones in the integration process – the Schengen open border area and the Euro – are widely unpopular, being blamed between them for a number of problems ranging from Italy's poor economic performance to the attacks on women in Cologne in the New Year period.

The EU élite still wishes to push ahead with further economic and fiscal integration within the Eurozone. A recent interview with Herman van Rompuy, the former European Council President, is most revealing. On the one hand, he says "The economic and monetary union and the single market will have to be deepened and/or completed. An emphasis on the EU's military dimension has emerged as a genuine topic of interest for the very first time." In other words, a further deepening of European integration has to be the way forward, but on the other hand, he admits that "I am not, however, urging immediate moves towards federalism or the United States of Europe... The climate in Europe does not favour such a qualitative leap, even if there is a crying need for more ambition than at present when, in truth, there is no ambition at all."

This is the heart of the EU's crisis. The drive for federalism has run out of steam and even its most ardent supporters are admitting as much. Could the EU project ever change its objectives and come up with an alternative destination other than an United States of Europe? It's hard to see how. So much has been invested into the federalist project. The whole structure of the EU institutions, the single currency and the open border area were designed with this end in view. If the EU powers-that-be decided that the end game should be scaled back to nothing more than a free trade area, just about everything would need drastic tweaking and downsizing as the whole structure of the EU is so cumbersome.

Given the number of committed federalists who are still very much on board, such Guy Verhofstadt, the former Belgian Prime Minister, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the 1960s Marxist rabble-rouser turned Green MEP or indeed Mr Juncker himself, such an abandonment of the original vision would be tantamount to a betrayal. The word "immediate" in Mr van Rompuy's comments is perhaps the giveaway. What he is implying is "let's bide our time. Let's not push for closer integration when the mood is so unfriendly. Let's hope that a few years down the line, hostility will have subsided and we can then press on." This was essentially the way the UK was treated with our opt-outs.

There was clearly no support in the UK for our joining the €uro when the single currency was launched but the unspoken hope was that one day, we would come to our senses, albeit one step behind the other member states.

The problem is that we never did and what if sentiment against further integration in EU-27 doesn't soften either? No wonder the EU élite is nervous about the prospect of contagion from Brexit or the Trump victory spreading to the European mainland.

But it's not just people like Marine le Pen or Beppe Grillo who will be making them jittery. The previously unthinkable is being thought in the most unlikely places. This article in the usually solidly pro-EU *Irish Times* is case in point. Perhaps you've never heard the term "Eirexit" before as the prospect of Ireland leaving the EU would have seemed unthinkable even a couple of years ago. After all, EU membership was widely viewed in Ireland as a means of further consolidating its separate identity from the UK following independence in 1922. Yet since our referendum, the writer informs us, "Eirexit has gained some momentum ... There is a small but growing band of public figures questioning the basis of Irish EU membership." The article lists the various fringe parties in Ireland which support withdrawal and devotes considerable space to a profile of Dr Anthony Coughlan, a veteran anti-EU campaigner whose analysis of the constitutional implications of the Lisbon Treaty has been posted on our website and included in our booklet *A House Divided* as it is second to none.

The *Irish Times* article concludes asks "Are these a collection of disparate and peripheral voices, or do they reflect a population far less enamoured of Brussels than its political leaders?" That such a question should even be asked by a leading newspaper in a country like Ireland is an indication of how far the project has drifted since the days of Jean Rey or even Jacques Delors in the 1980s. Just as the €uro was designed to be an irreversible currency union, the whole EU project was constructed without any reverse gear. It finally acquired an escape hatch in the shape of Article 50, but even here, Giuliano Amati, the man who claims he drafted this section of the treaty, never intended it to be used.

One does not wish to gloat over the soul-searching which has taken place in many European capitals in recent months. After

all, a sudden collapse of the whole project would leave a dreadful economic and political mess whose ripples would be felt this side of the channel too. For all its faults. one impetus behind the European project was a commendable desire to avoid the carnage seen in 1914-8 and 1939-45.

Unfortunately, the bad design and premature launch of the Single Currency, the failure of the Schengen area to cope with the refugee crisis – not to mention the deceit and democratic deficit which has characterised the EU since its inception – are all conspiring together to drag the EU into a greater and greater crisis. We can but hope that the end result will not be another European war which the EU was meant to prevent, but it would certainly be more helpful if our own pro-EU politicians like Tim Farron and Owen Smith could devote their energies to devising a way for the EU peacefully to dismember itself rather than talking about taking us back into a failing political union which may not even exist in anything like its current form by the time we next go to the ballot box.